

Reading takes center stage

Gets more time in K-3 program

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Eight-year-old Paola Arteaga's library card shows the third-grader is becoming a voracious reader.

And her mother, Susana Cabrera, credits Reading First, a multimillion-dollar federal reading initiative launched this fall that aims to have third-graders reading at fourth-grade levels by the end of the school year.

Part of President Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative, Reading First will bring about \$105 million to Arizona schools over six years.

"I'm thrilled with this program because it is nurturing a love of literature in my daughter," Cabrera said.

Paola is one of 21 students in Mindy Lake's third-grade class at Lowell Elementary in Mesa, one of 64 Valley schools now involved in the standardized program. She and her classmates spend 90 minutes daily in reading class, three times the regular class time for other grade school subjects.

Teachers get extra training in reading and then focus on each student's individual reading skills.

A recent glance inside Lake's classroom shows students separated into three groups. All read the same story, *Be Careful! Turtles Ahead*, but each group's lesson plan is adjusted to students' reading abilities, which fluctuate from poor to at-grade level.

"The individualized approach is great because no one learns in the same way," Lake said. "Some kids are visual learners; others are more verbal. It really depends on the child."

One group sits at the listening center wearing headsets while reading along with the audio version of the story.

"I like hearing the words on the headphones because it helps me learn more,"



Russell Gates/The Arizona Republic

At Lowell Elementary in Mesa, Mindy Lake gives her third-graders a spelling lesson that is part of Reading First, a federal program that was launched this fall.

said 8-year-old Joseph Andujar, flashing a mischievous grin.

The audio technique is especially helpful with English-language learners, such as Paola, who then mimic the "reader's" pronunciation, said teacher's aide Cherry Edullantes.

Across the room, Paola and her group sit at their tables reviewing questions on the tale of turtle preservation, while Lake leads the more advanced readers into an in-depth review designed to gauge students' reading comprehension.

"That's very important because some kids can read but not understand what they're reading," Lake said.

Each of the schools involved in Reading First will snare about \$200,000 annually to fund the K-3 program.

Arizona became one of the first states to secure Reading First grants. The program, which will get the federal funding over six years, is backed by AZ Reads, the state's first statewide reading initiative. Nearly 28,000 Arizona students will participate in the program, including students from 12 Valley school districts. Many of the schools share demographics similar to Lowell's, where more than 90 percent of the students are on free or reduced-price lunch and 85 percent of the students hail from homes where English is a second language.

Arizona educators view the Reading First program as critical because studies show that kids who can't read by the third grade rarely get up to speed later and often drop out. What's more, third grade marks the first time students take the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test, and recent scores showed about 30 percent of them failed to meet the state standard for reading.

"That's not the kind of news any teacher or parent wants to hear," Lake said. "So we're thrilled to have the financial support to provide additional assistance to struggling students."

Schools had to demonstrate high poverty levels and low reading achievement to qualify for the federal grants. This year, those that made the cut will share more than \$14 million, said Marie Mancuso, director of AZ Reads. The three-year grants pay for reading specialists, classroom materials, tutoring programs and teacher training.

Teachers are trained in five key reading areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

After assessment teams identify students' weaknesses, teachers separate them into skill-based learning groups to target those areas. Frequent quick assessments are also part of the plan, with those who don't make the expected

gains pulled out for intensive before- and after-school tutoring.

One challenge of the reading program is balancing the 90-minute reading time with the other 15- to 30-minute subject blocks, Lake said.

"I love having that uninterrupted literacy time, and I think the students will really benefit," she said. "But it's a struggle timewise. I don't feel we're spending enough time on math or science."

Still, having all students read at grade level is every educator's dream, she said.

"It's a lofty ambition that some people call unrealistic," she said. "But it's a goal we should all have. Wouldn't it be wonderful if that came to pass?"

Paola's mother agreed, adding that parents who don't speak English can still help their kids develop a love for reading in English.

"I bought a dictionary to help her with some words because my English isn't that good," Cabrera said. "It's about supporting them and encouraging them and making sure they read and get their homework done. You don't have to know English to do that."